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ABSTRACT

Using a theoretical framework known as family systems theory, an exploratory study in progress is examining the role of media in the home. Three areas representative of the research are: (1) the place of mass media in the roles of the individual family members; (2) how the media regulate interactions between family members; and (3) the function of the media in structuring the temporal environment of the home. Data from observations and interviews were organized by looking at between-family differences, within-family differences, and between-media differences. Some preliminary results of the research on socioeconomic status (SES) differences related to time use have indicated that high SES families tend to be monochronic and low SES families tend to be polychronic. A second element of the analysis is the way in which family roles get played out in the media patterns of the home. The mother's media use reflects her "manager" role. Fathers typically use media to the exclusion of other activities. When looking at sibling roles, the media patterns and preferences of the oldest often dictate the patterns of the younger. A third domain of family life is that of interaction within the home. Media content is used by all families as a fodder for discussion about particular family issues. The research spotlights the notion that context is important in understanding media effects, and attempts to fill in a theoretical vacuum in the understanding of the role of the media in family life. (Sixteen references are attached.) (MG)

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# THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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Studies that look at the role of mass media in the lives of individuals and society often decontextualize people from their environments. Many researchers study the media as if the "audiences" are alone with the medium -- few external variables, internal factors, or other human experiences are seen as involved in the process. Clearly, this is not the case. Media messages are rarely received in isolation and often there is a complex context of psychological, social, and environmental variables that needs to be accounted for if we are to understand mass media behavior in individuals and in society.

Over the years that I have spent researching children and the media, I have come to believe that one very important consideration in the study of mass media is this context within which media use occurs. In most cases, it is safe to assume that people watch, read and listen within a social context -- and more often than not that social context is the family. From the day most newborns are brought home from the hospital, they will live in a world surrounded by images from television, sounds from radios and records, and words from books, magazines and newspapers. The statistics support this: nearly every American home has at least one television and radio and a majority of families subscribe to newspapers and magazines (Gollin and Anderson, 1980). Add to this the variety of audio media (such as cassettes, CDs, turntables) and video media (such as VCRs and cable) that are available in the home and we are left with the impression that the home environment is a heavy media environment.

We might also study the home as a place where we learn how to use media. Children are socialized to certain expectations about what the media can offer and what needs a medium can satisfy. The availability of a medium in a home, the observation of parents and siblings interacting with media, and the usefulness of media content in helping or hindering discussions, all serve to teach children when, how and under what conditions a medium should be used. And there is evidence that these media behaviors we learn as children will carry through our adult lives (Himmelweit and Swift, 1976).

We can, and indeed we should, extend our thinking about the relationship between mass media and the family beyond the simple socialization of children to uses of and attitudes toward the media. Obviously, the family provides a rich context for its members. It has norms, values, and beliefs that are woven into the fabric of family life. From this perspective, it makes little sense to think about media or individual family members apart from these norms, values and beliefs. Instead, we need to try to understand how the family functions as a system and to what extent media play an integral part in the system. In sum, media need to be placed back into the context of the home and studied for their role in shaping and reflecting the totality of family life.

I'm not the first person to argue that it is important to study media use in the home. Jim Lull has done extensive research on the social uses of television and has found evidence that television plays an important role in providing companionship and background noise in the home as well as

regulating the conversations and activities of family members (Lull, 1980). Researchers such as Leichter and her students, moreover, have looked into television's role in punctuating time and organizing space in the home (Leichter et al., 1986; Bryce and Leichter, 1983).

Other researchers have focused in more narrowly on family rules about TV use (Mohr, 1979), family roles (particularly gender roles) and their relationship to TV use and control (Morley, 1986), the the ways in which comments about TV reflect the family's communication patterns (Messaris and Kerr, 1983; Lull, 1983). These studies are interesting and have been useful in placing television use back into a social context but they neglect to do two things. First, non-television media are virtually ignored by communications researchers. While television may be the most dominant medium in the home, it is certainly not the only medium. Print and audio media, as well as related television technologies such as the VCR, need to be figured in as part of the media environment of the home. They need to be thought of as part of a "package" of media which is available to family members.

A second shortcoming of this research is the absence of any theoretical framework for understanding the role of the media in the home. The family's use of the media is described but no attempt is made to understand or explain the processes. Theory is necessary if we are to make sense out of where media behaviors come from and what role they play in family life.

Thus, in my research I have set out to understand the role

of the media (all media) in the home. I am working within a theoretical framework known as Family Systems Theory. Family systems theory has only recently been acknowledged and implemented by researchers outside of the study of family therapy. It grew out of the broader General Systems Theory whose basic premise is that one must study wholes rather than parts if one is to understand how the system functions (thus following the maxim "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts") (Vetere and Gale, 1987; Bavelas and Segal, 1982). It was adopted by family therapists who believed it important to think about individuals as members of an ecological system. They came to consider how the distinct elements of the family work to establish and regulate the functioning of the whole family -- despite internal and external pressures to change. Original family systems theorists Bochner and Eisenberg (1987) thus state that this "represented an epistomological turn away from thinking of 'forces' and 'causes' toward thinking of 'relationships' and 'contexts'; away from linear models and towards recursive or circular descriptions" (p. 4).

The study of media in family life certainly benefits from a grounding in family systems theory. Mass media use has traditionally been removed from the family context as individuals' behavior with the media are studied in isolation (for example, Gerbner's Cultural Indicators research and Anderson's experiments with children's understanding of television). While such research has its uses, it neglects to get at some of the more complex issues involved in social activity around the media and collective meaning making of media

messages. My study therefore pursues the question of "How does mass media use emerge from and contribute to both the component parts and the overall structure of family life?"

All too often we see media use in the family explained by demographics such as income, education and race. While such correlations may indeed exist, what is missing is the reason for the relationship between, for example, socioeconomic status and television use. Family systems theory would acknowledge that SES impacts upon TV use, but would seek to explore why there are significant differences in norms around media use in families of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, demographic variables are not seen as having a direct relationship to media-related outcomes but are conceptualized as having an important role both in shaping the climate of family life and in influencing the family's goals, values and beliefs.

Going beyond demographics to explain outcome variables requires a new way of studying the family. Most family systems theorists argue that the unit of analysis in this kind of research must be the family as a whole (Vetere and Gale, 1987). Within this whole are sub-systems which need to be examined for their relationship to eachother and to the larger system. One needs to look at the parent-parent dyad, the parent-child dyads, and the sibling relationships.

It is also important to understand the multiple arenas of family life in which perspectives, interactions, conflicts, etc. get played out. My research concentrates on two broad domains of family life. The first, which myself and others (namely Lull,

1980) call the "structural domain", includes how time and space are organized within the home. The second broad domain, which I call the "social domain", is made up of the family's roles, rules, interactions, and educative environment. Clearly these domains are related to each other and, in family systems terms, related to the overall goals of the family. It is also clear that these are not the only domains of family life. Previous research as well as my own exploratory pretests uncovered these areas as fruitful realms for study. Thus, the structural and social dimensions within the home form the context for understanding the place of media in family life.

Due to time constraints, I will limit today's discussion to three of these areas as they are both representative of my work and also have emerged as significant in analysis. These areas are: 1) the place of mass media in the roles the individual family members have assumed, 2) how the media regulate interactions between family members, and 3) the function of the media in structuring the temporal environment of the home.

Family systems theorists argue that to understand the system, you can neither remove it from the natural setting of the home nor study family process outside of its original temporal occurance (Vetere and Gale, 1987; Bochner and Eisenberg, 1987). Methodologies that employ experiments or surveys neither get at the complex functioning of the family (since it is so often implicit and subconscious) nor the more subtle patterns of behavior around media. For example, some families have the television set on ten or more hours a day as a kind of background noise, and much of the time attention to the set is peripheral

(Morley, 1979). This kind of television exposure would be hard to capture in a question on daily average television viewing. In my study, I also have an interest in seeing how parents use media to educate children. Even though in the interview parents tended to say they didn't teach through media, I saw many examples of "educating" in the off-hand comments made in and around viewing or reading situations. Most often, these comments were informal and spontaneous. It is therefore understandable that parents wouldn't recall them.

Thus, I have chosen to research the question of the role of the mass media in the family system through a more naturalistic, ethnographic approach than is typically employed in research on family and the media. Though communications researchers rarely use participant observation in studying media effects, a few scholars have had success with this technique when it is conducted in the home over two or more days (for example, Lull, 1980; Palmer, 1986; Leichter, et al., 1985; Morley, 1986). My approach is to spend mornings and evenings on three consecutive weekdays with 21 families of upper-middle, middle, and working class status (7 each). I take this time to observe how media use and content fit in to the daily lives of families with young children. At the end of my stay, I do interviews with both parents that last approximately 45 minutes in order to explore parental attitudes toward media and to validate my own observations. I chose these times for observation since I am studying families where both parents work and these are typically the times that the family is all together. On the average, I

spend 13-16 hours in each home.

Certainly there are problems with this technique. There is the danger that families may change their behavior in response to this "outside stranger". I decided to work with families for three days on the assumption that dramatic changes couldn't be maintained over that amount of time. During the interviews at the end of the observational period, I always asked parents what difference my presence made in the home. Invariably, parents said that there were little or no significant changes due to me. A few parents did point out, however, that the family tended to be more fully clothed on the mornings that I was there.

With the data from my observations and interviews, I've organized my analysis in the following way. First, I am looking at between family differences. My sample is divided along SES lines, so I am asking: "What consequences does the family's socioeconomic status have for the role of the media in family life?" Second, I am examining within family differences. Specifically, "How do mothers, fathers, and children differentially use media in their daily patterns?" Finally, I am looking at between media differences. "What are the various roles print media, audio media and television play in the home?"

As I stated earlier, under each analystical heading will be an exploration of the media's role in the structuring of time and space within the home, as well as their role in the interaction patterns, roles, rules, and educational processes of the family. For the present talk, however, I will focus in on some of the trends I'm finding regarding the part media play in defining and or reflecting family time, roles and interactions. Since my

analysis is in its final stages, I can't give you the definitive word on the role of the media in the family system but, as I said earlier, I'll describe some of the more interesting trends that are emerging.

Let me start with time.

o Research on socioeconomic differences related to time use has found that high SES families tend to be monochronic -- that is, they stress doing one thing at a time. Low SES families, on the other hand, tend to be polychronic. In other words many activities overlap or are carried on simultaneously (Timmer et al., 1985). I have found that regardless of SES all children under 6 are polychronic in their time use. They tend to have a lot of things going at once, particularly when watching TV. Rarely do they just sit and watch -- most often they'll be involved with coloring, dancing around, talking, eating, etc. Differences come into play with the parents, though. Parents in the higher SES groups try (and often fail) to get their kids to do one thing at a time. Media, for example, are presented as either/or options. For example, this high SES family was watching Mary Poppins when their five old son said:

Jason: "I want you to read a book."
Silence.
Jason: "I want you to read it now."
Mother: "I don't want to, honestly. You can't watch the movie and read a book at the same time. OK?"

Jason watches the movie.

o A second interesting difference that I have found in mono- vs. polychronicity is parental behavior with media. Mothers are

more likely to use media in conjunction with other activities (like ironing, eating, taking care of kids) while fathers are more single minded in their media use. This reflects the roles that many parents have assumed in the home. Mothers are often the managers of the household and are often coordinating simultaneous activities. Thus, in my observations and interviews, I've found mother's polychronic time use and multiple roles to be reflected in their media patterns.

o Another relationship between media and time is the notion that media might contribute to the structuring of the family's day. Lull (1980) found that families often used television to punctuate their day. I have found a similar use of television. For example, many children "ease" into the day by watching cartoons or other children's television and wind down each day by watching tv and/or reading a book. The bedtime story ritual is an important one, especially for younger children, as it makes that temporal transition from daytime to nighttime (and from being together to being alone) and easier one. (Albert and Jones, 1977, have also discussed this use of print media.) Many children also use musical tapes to achieve the same purpose.

The regularity of the use of media to mark time, I've found, is related to the consitency of other temporal markers in the family (for example, dinnertime and bedtime). Higher SES families are more rigid and routinized about their "rituals" than lower SES families. For instance, a number of high SES families would invariably watch the news and then move to eat dinner the

minute it is over. Moreover, higher SES families have stricter notions about how much time can be spent with media before bedtime. For example, this high SES mother said to her daughter:

> Do you want to watch Dumbo? You can watch the whole thing. (The daughter says yes.) If we hurry, then we have just enough time to watch all of Dumbo tonight. But then, no story. We can't do Dumbo and a story. You can watch all of Dumbo and no story or half of Dumbo and a story. (The little girl chooses Dumbo.)

o Related to the finding that higher SES families have more definite daily schedules is the fact that their "plans" have a clear temporal order. This is reinforced verbally by parents who say: "First we're going to do this, then this, then this." This serves to teach the child clear ordering to the day, as well as the value that things are to be done sequentially.

o A lot of families had what they call "quiet time". An hour or so before dinner the kids would settle down and do something that didn't involve noise. It was a way for parents to regain control over the children and their activities. Since the children were often expected to entertain themselves during this period, the activity would generally end up being TV viewing or book reading. Parents also had their "quiet time" in the evening once the kids went to bed. The hour or so between their children's bedtime and their own bedtime tended to be devoted to television viewing. Also, many parents told me that they would read in order to help them go to sleep -- much like the purpose the bedtime story serves for children.

A second element of my analysis that I want to describe for you is the way in which family roles get played out in the media patterns of the home. I will focus on the gender role differentiation that I've seen in media use, but I will also describe some sibling roles that have emerged. I began considering this after reading Morley's (1986) description of how gender-related power struggles occured in the selection of tv shows and the control of the remote in British families. While I've seen few power struggles in my families, I have seen that media reflect and shape the various roles assumed by the family members.

o I said earlier that one relationship between roles and media use is the fact that the mother's media use reflects her "manager" role -- that is, she tends engage in other activities while using television, print or audio media. (Fathers, you'll recall, typically use media to the exclusion of other activities). Similarly, mothers are more likely to be in the company of her children while consuming media while fathers are more likely to be alone.

o Also related to the notion of roles is the impact of the father's involvement in household and child care task on children's media use. I've found that children with fathers who are very involved in the home typically watch less television than kids whose fathers are more absent. The reason for this became obvious in my interviews, when I would ask what children like to do with their parents. Kids would nearly always rather

play with or be around their parents than watch TV or listen to radio with them. Activities of choice rarely included media, unless it involved being read to by a parent. I found a similar pattern of media use in home where moms had very demanding jobs. The less available the mother, the more willing children are to use television to fill the time.

o It is the mothers who generally control children's media use by making rules or acting as the gatekeeper (renting the videos, going to the library, subscribing to magazines). Fathers have little interest in this aspect of child rearing and seem to be willing to follow the mother's lead. This is reflective of the type of child care responsibility distribution of the home. Decisions relating to the daily activities of the children are left to the mother while larger, more long-term decisions like schools, health or extra-curricular lessons are typically made jointly.

o Sibling roles appear to play an important part in children's media use. Quite often, the media patterns and preferences of the oldest dictate the patterns of the younger. In a few families, parents would encourage the viewing of Sesame Street for the younger child even though it wasn't age-appropriate for the older one. For the most part, however, the oldest chooses the program, book, or cassette tape and manages its use. The older child often has more status or power in the eyes of the younger child (and sometimes the eyes of the parent)

and is allowed to dominate media situations just as he or she might dominate non-media situations.

o When siblings watch TV together or are read to together, there are little struggles over the climate of the situation. While the older child becomes engrossed in whatever he or she is watching, reading, or listening, the younger one often wants to talk or play with his or her older sibling. The younger sibling is ignored, for the most part, but might be attended to if her or she gets especially distracting (and needs to be put in his or her place with a punch). Moreover, older siblings are willing to play the "teacher" role if the younger child is confused about something.

A third domain of family life that I'd like to describe for you is that of interaction within the home. The media's role in family interaction can be thought of as either positive (encouraging discussion) or negative (providing barriers to discussion) and often acts as both at various times. This is perhaps the hardest to define and measure, but comments I've heard and connections that I've witnessed convince me that media content and media themselves play an important part in regulating social relations between family members.

o Media content is used by all families as a fodder for discussion about particular family issues. One working mother read a Sesame Street book to her child about a little girl who

was cared for by a babysitter when her mother was at work. The mother then discussed her child's feeling about babysitters and talked through the negative feelings she had. Another woman told me about a discussion she had with her husband after watching an episode of thirtysomething with him.

> "We were watching thirtysomething last night, did you ever see that show? I love that. You know, that was kind of sad last night about the divorce. I mean, I don't know, but I like thirtysomething because it deals with ... just the torment that they were feeling for eachother inside. And they weren't letting eachother know. And Dave and I said to eachother, you know, 'We're not getting a divorce but we're not far from it. You know, you don't tell me and I don't tell you. I mean this is the second rotten Christmas we've had since we've been in this brand new house. Can't you say something?' Cause I'm not saying anything right now. And he thinks I don't care."

By the way, thirtysomething is a show that's both very popular with my sample families and one which is mentioned often as providing a basis for discussion between the mother and father. But television shows and books in general offer a common basis from which to work. Parents who have trouble communicating with each other or with their children can use media content as a springboard for discussions about sensitive issues, and can use stories they've seen, heard or read to formulate a common way of thinking about the world and the family's place in it. or

o I've found some interesting differences between mothers and fathers in terms of the media's role in interactions. When parents want to "snuggle up" with their kids, fathers are more likely to use television viewing while mothers are more likely to use book reading. This may be because the mother is typically the person to read to their children either during the day or at

bedtime. Mothers are also more likely to make comments to the children during book reading and TV viewing than fathers, probably because she spends more time with her children in media-related situations.

o Between family differences have also emerged with respect to interactions. Lower SES parents are more likely to watch TV with their kids than higher SES parents. The reason for this lies in the kind of TV the kids watch. Lower SES children are more likely to watch adult fare network programming that would appeal to parents, while higher SES kids typically watch children's videos or programs that parents aren't interested in. This often relates to the kind of content control and time-related rules parents have enforced with respect to television viewing.

o Lower SES families say they teach through television while higher SES families are more likely to say they teach through books. This may be related to the amount of time spent together with children in media situations, or may be related to social norms about what are "good media" and "bad media". In my interviews, I found that higher SES families have more extreme views of the value and effects of media (television is bad for children while books are good for them) than lower SES families.

I could continue with my findings on the role of the media in the home, but I think that what I've described can give you an indication of how I'm making sense of my data. I'm not just

describing what's happening with media in these families, I'm linking media behaviors back to larger patterns of behaviors in the family system. Certainly, there are shortcomings with this kind of study. I've had to limit my sample both in number and kind. The amount of time I've spent with each family, however, gives me a validity and depth of insight that can't be achieved in large sample surveys. Clearly, my data cannot be seen as representative of all American families. After this phase of my research, I'd like to go on and study families of different races, ethnicity, structures (one-parent and reconstituted families), and residences (for example, urban and rural families).

In sum, I feel that this research -- while exploratory and descriptive -- can contribute much to our of study media and society. It spotlights the notion that context is important in our understanding of effects, and attempts to fill a theoretical vacuum in our understanding of the role of the media in family life.

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